

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7439

S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1788

NODIS

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARA 3 GARBLED)

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PPDC SY US LE MOPS PEPR IS
SUBJECT: MARCH 30 MEETING WITH ASSAD - THE BEGIN VISIT AND
SOUTH LEBANON

REF: STATE 77945

SUMMARY: ASSAD IS CONCERNED THAT WE HAVE WEAKENED OUR
POSITION RE WITHDRAWAL FROM OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. I TOLD
HIM THAT THERE WAS NO BASIS FOR SUCH ASSUMPTION. HE CONSIDERS
MAJOR PALESTINIAN LEADERS FAVOR MAINTENANCE OF CEASEFIRE
IN SOUTH LEBANON. PROBABILITY THAT UNCONTROLLED INDIVIDUAL
PALESTINIANS WILL LAUNCH ROCKETS AGAINST ISRAELI TARGETS
SHOULD NOT BE USED BY ISRAEL TO JUSTIFY FURTHER AGGRESSION.
HE REACTED NEGATIVELY TO IDEA OF FUTURE EXTENSION OF ADF CONTROL
INTO NO-MAN'S LAND BUT DID NOT RPT NOT EXPLICITLY RULE IT OUT.
SAID THIS PROBLEM SHOULD BE DEALT WITH BY APPLICATION OF ALREADY
EXISTING GOL-PALESTINIAN AGREEMENTS. HE WELCOMES CONTINUANCE
OF US-SYRIAN EXCHANGES ON ME PEACE PROCESS. END SUMMARY

1. MET WITH ASSAD AFTERNOON MARCH 30 TO DELIVER
PRESIDENTIAL MESSAGE REFTEL AND PURSUE DISCUSSION
OF SOUTH LEBANON DEVELOPMENTS AND UNIFIL.

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2. ASSAD'S FIRST REACTION TO LETTER, AND HE RETURNED TO THIS
QUESTION LATER IN CONVERSATION, WAS TO COMPLAIN THAT THE
USG HAS RETREATED FROM ITS FORMULATION CONCERNING ISRAELI
OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. SAID HE HAD ORIGINALLY UNDERSTOOD FROM
PRESIDENT CARTER THAT US POSITION WAS ISRAEL SHOULD WITHDRAW
FROM ALL THE TERRITORIES OCCUPIED IN 1967, THE ONLY EXCEPTION

BEING POSSIBLE MINOR AND MUTUALLY AGREED UPON RECTIFICATION OF LINES ON THE WEST BANK. THESE WOULD BE JUSTIFIABLE FOR HUMANITARIAN REASONS SUCH AS REUNITING FAMILY MEMBERS AND DIVIDED VILLAGES. ASSAD SAID PRESIDENT CARTER'S LETTER SUGGESTED A GREATER DIVERGENCE BETWEEN VIEWS OF WASHINGTON AND DAMASCUS OVER OCCUPIED TERRITORIES THAN BETWEEN WASHINGTON AND JERUSALEM. HE STRESSED THERE MUST BE NO AMBIGUITY ABOUT ISRAEL'S OBLIGATION TO RETURN TO THE INTERNATIONAL BORDERS OF EGYPT AND SYRIA. "PREVIOUSLY, I THOUGHT WE WERE IN AGREEMENT THAT THERE WAS NO QUESTION ABOUT THE NEED FOR TOTAL WITHDRAWAL; I SENSE SOME CHANGE IN YOUR POSITION," ASSAD SAID.

3. I REPLIED PRESIDENT HAD SAID NOTHING IN LATEST MESSAGE TO IMPLY ANY SHIFT IN US POLICY CONCERNING OCCUPIED TERRITORIES. REMINDED ASSAD WE HAD NEVER ACCEPTED FORMULA THAT WITHDRAWAL SHOULD APPLY TO "THE, I.E. "ALL," TERRITORIES OCCUPIED IN 1967, FIRST PART OF PRESIDENT CARTER'S LETTER FOCUSED ON THE BEGIN VISIT. HE WAS DESCRIBING HOW HE HAD EMPHASIZED TO BEGIN THAT THERE MUST BE A COMMON DENOMINATOR FOR THE NEGOTIATIONS. WE HAD UNDERScoreD TO THE PRIME MINISTER THE CENTRALITY OF THE QUESTION OF WHETHER THERE WILL BE ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL ON ALL FRONTS IN CONTEXT OF PEACE COMMITMENTS, SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS AND AGREED BORDERS WHICH WILL IN ADDITION ALLOW PALESTINIANS A REAL VOICE IN DETERMINING THEIR

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OWN FUTURE. WE HAD MADE CLEAR THAT THERE HAD TO BE AN AGREED BASIS FOR NEGOTIATIONS OR NO ARAB PARTY WOULD NEGOTIATE. HE WAS WRITING TO ASSAD ABOUT THE PRINCIPLE OF WITHDRAWAL. WE HAD NEVER BEFORE HAD SO FLAT A DISAGREEMENT WITH ISRAEL ON THIS PRINCIPLE. WE HAD TOLD BEGIN WE BELIEVED HE MUST COME BACK TO THE POSITION MAINTAINED BY ALL ISRAELI GOVERNMENTS SINCE 1967. (COMMENT: AFTERWARDS, THE PRESIDENT'S PRESS SECRETARY SAID TH THOUGHT THE PRESIDENT HAD BEEN DISTURBED BY THE PHRASE IN PARA 2 OF THE LETTER "THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF THE WITHDRAWAL FROM OCCUPIED TERRITORIES APPLIES TO ALL FRONTS." THIS HAD APPARENTLY STRUCK ASSAD AS A WEAKER FORMULATION THAN HE HAD EXPECTED.)

4. SOUTH LEBANON. ASSAD AGREED WITH OBSERVATION THAT THERE WERE NO DISAGREEMENTS BETWEEN US ON THE NEED TO DO ALL POSSIBLE TO RESTORE GOL AUTHORITY IN SOUTH LEBANON AS RAPIDLY AS POSSIBLE. HE MADE NO REPLY TO MY FOLLOW-ON COMMENT THAT WE THOUGHT ENTRY OF FURTHER NON-ADF FORCES WOULD COMPLICATE THE PROBLEM OF RESTORING STABILITY FOR BOTH GOL AND ADF. SAID I BELIEVED WE ALSO AGREED THAT PALESTINIANS SHOULD COOPERATE WITH UN FORCES

IN CARRYING OUT THEIR MANDATE AND THAT A
CONTINUING CEASEFIRE WAS ESSENTIAL. I DESCRIBED THE WIDE
CONTACTS AMBASSADOR PARKER IS PURSUING IN BEIRUT AND SAID
THAT HIS MESSAGE TO ALL LEBANESE LEADERS IS FOR THE NEED
TO COOPERATE WITH UNIFIL AS THE BEST WAY
TO SECURE RAPID ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL AND RESTORE LEBANESE
SOVEREIGNTY TO THE SOUTH. THEN ASKED IF ASSAD COULD TELL US
ANYTHING ABOUT SYRIA'S CONTACTS WITH PALESTINIAN LEADERS.
PRESIDENT REPLIED THAT CEASEFIRE WAS IN EFFECT AND APPEARED TO BE
HOLDING. THE MAJOR PALESTINIAN GROUPS HAD INDICATED THEIR
DESIRE TO SEE IT CONTINUE AND "I WOULD CHARACTERIZE THE
PALESTINIAN ATTITUDE AS POSITIVE." THE PRINCIPAL
PALESTINIAN LEADERS ARE ALL CONSCIOUS OF THE NEED TO GIVE
NO PRETEXT TO ISRAEL TO DELAY WITHDRAWAL. (COMMENT: HE
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WOULD NOT BE DRAWN INTO SPECIFICS ON SYRO-PALESTINIAN CONTACTS.)
HOWEVER, PRESIDENT ADDED, INEVITABLY THERE WILL BE SPORADIC
ROCKET LAUNCHINGS BY INDIVIDUALS OR SMALL UNCONTROLLABLE
GROUPS. ISRAEL SHOULD NOT BE ALLOWED TO ARGUE THAT THOSE
ATTACKS JUSTIFY RENEWED AGGRESSION.

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S E C R E T SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 1788

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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARA 8 GARBLE)

5. NO-MAN'S LAND. SPOKE OF OUR CONCERN ABOUT NO-MAN'S
LAND BETWEEN ADF AND UNIFIL UNITS. WHILE WE CERTAINLY
HOPED SUCH WILL NOT OCCUR, WE COULD NOT RULE OUT DEVELOPMENT

OF SITUATION WHERE UNIFIL CONTROLLED ALL THE AREA BETWEEN THE LITANI AND THE ISRAELI BORDER AND PALESTINIANS CONTINUED TO FIRE ARTILLERY AND ROCKETS FROM NO-MAN'S LAND INTO THE ISRAELI AND UN-CONTROLLED AREAS. ISRAELI COUNTER STRIKES IN THAT CASE ARE PREDICTABLE. WE HOPED SYRIA WOULD THINK ABOUT HOW TO RESTORE STABILITY TO THIS AREA AND ALSO, AS SITUATION EVOLVED, KEEP UNDER REVIEW THE POSSIBILITY OF EXTENDING ADF CONTROL OVER THE NO-MAN'S LAND. ASSAD REPLIED QUICKLY THAT STABILITY IN NO-MAN'S-LAND SHOULD BE ASSURED BY APPLICATION OF EXISTING AGREEMENTS BETWEEN GOL AND PALESTINIANS. HE ADDED THAT BOTH THE GOL AND THE PALESTINIANS HAD ALREADY PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGED THIS WAS THE WAY TO HANDLE THIS PROBLEM. I ASKED IF HE WERE REFERRING TO THE CAIRO AGREEMENT. HE REPLIED HE MEANT THAT ONE AS WELL AS THE SHTAURA AGREEMENT. I REMARKED THAT THE WEAKNESS OF THE LEBANESE REGULAR FORCES WOULD FRUSTRATE ANY TRUE GOL/PALESTINIAN COOPERATION IN NO-MAN'S LAND. HE AGREED BUT REITERATED THE SOLUTION TO THE NO-MAN'S LAND LIES IN APPLICATION OF EXISTING AGREEMENTS, ADDING, "AFTER ALL, THE ADF IS NOT IN LEBANON TO
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DEFEND ISRAEL." (COMMENT: IT IS NONETHELESS SIGNIFICANT PRESIDENT DID NOT EXPLICITLY RULE OUT EXTENSION OF ADF CONTROL INTO NO-MAN'S LAND. IF HE DOES AUTHORIZE THIS, WE CAN ASSUME THAT IT WILL BE DONE AS DISCREETLY AS HE CAN MANAGE IT.)

6. TYRE. I REFERRED TO THE SPECIAL PROBLEM POSED BY TYRE AS THE SOUTHERNMOST MAJOR PALESTINIAN CONCENTRATION AND AS A MAJOR ARMS/AMMO CACHE OVER WHICH THE UN HAD NO CONTROL. UNIFIL DID NOT EVEN CONTROL ACCESS BY COASTAL ROAD. ASSAD PROFESSED IGNORANCE OF THE SITUATION IN TYRE, OBSERVING MERELY THAT HE ASSUMED THE UN COULD WORK OUT AN UNDERSTANDING WITH THE PALESTINIANS.

7. PEACE PROCESS. ASSAD VOLUNTEERED THAT HE WAS PLEASED WITH OUR CONTINUED EXCHANGES DESPITE OUR DIFFERENT ASSESSMENTS OF SADAT'S INITIATIVE. SYRIA REMAINED CONVINCED THAT EGYPT WAS DOING A DISSERVICE TO AREA PEACE. SYRIA'S AIM REMAINS TO ATTAIN A JUST PEACE BASED ON COMPLETE WITHDRAWAL FROM THE OCCUPIED TERRITORIES AND ACHIEVEMENT OF PALESTINIAN RIGHTS. AT THIS POINT, HE EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN ABOUT "THE LACK OF CLARITY IN RECENT US STATEMENTS ABOUT WITHDRAWAL," (COMMENT: I.E. GOING BEYOND THE PRESIDENT'S LETTER). AS FOR SOUTH LEBANON, THE MOST URGENT REQUIREMENT WAS FOR RAPID ISRAELI WITHDRAWAL AND HE ASKED THAT WE USE OUR INFLUENCE TO INCREASE ITS PACE. HE OBSERVED PRESIDENT CARTER'S COMMENT THAT HE UNDERSTOOD IDF HAD BEGUN TO WITHDRAW DID NOT COINCIDE WITH

SYRIA'S INFORMATION. I SAID OUR REPORTS INDICATED ISRAEL HAD ALREADY SIGNIFICANTLY THINNED OUT ITS SUPPORT FORCES IN MF BORDER AREA, PERHAPS AS MANY AS A THOUSAND SOLDIERS HAD BEEN WITHDRAWN.

8. ASSAD DECRIED TO ISRAELI INVASION AS A FURTHER LINK
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IN THE LONG HISTORY OF ISRAELI AGGRESSIONS. NO INTER-NATIONAL LAW JUSTIFIED THE RECENT INVASION. IT WAS ONE MORE PROOF THAT IT WAS THE ARABS WHO NEEDED SECURE BORDERS. MORE IMPORTANTLY, IT SHOWED THE NEED FOR A JUST SOLUTION TO THE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM.

9. ASSAD THEN OBSERVED THAT EGYPT'S PRESS HAD BEEN ASKING WHY SYRIA HAD DONE NOTHING TO REPEL THE ISRAELI INVASION. HE STATED, "HAD CAIRO ONLY EXERCISED PRESSURE AGAINST ISRAEL IN THE SINAI, SYRIA WOULD HAVE DONE THE SAME FROM ITS TERRITORY." I SAID WE HAD TOLD EGYPTIANS WE THOUGHT THEIR RECENT PRESS PLAY ABOUT SYRIA'S ROLE IN LEBANON WAS UNHELPFUL. ASSAD MADE NO DIRECT RESPONSE TO THIS BUT NOTED THAT HE HAD HEARD THERE WERE PLANS FOR FEDAYEEN ACTIVITY AGAINST ISRAEL IN SINAI. WHETHER OR NOT THIS DEVELOPS, THE PALESTINIANS WILL CONTINUE THEIR STRUGGLE UNTIL THEIR RIGHTS ARE SATISFIED IN THE CONTEXT OF AN OVERALL SETTLEMENT. "THIS, NATURALLY, WILL TAKE SOME TIME." MEANWHILE, THEIR STRUGGLE WILL CONTINUE FROM ALL FOUR COUNTRIES SURROUNDING ISRAEL.

10. IN CONCLUSION, ASSAD SENT HIS THANKS TO THE PRESIDENT FOR HIS MESSAGE AND HIS BEST WISHES TO BOTH THE PRESIDENT AND THE SECRETARY. HE WANTED BOTH TO KNOW HE WELCOMED CONTINUED EX-CHANGES ON MIDDLE EAST DEVELOPMENTS.

11. COMMENT: OUR MEETING, WHICH RAN OVER AN HOUR WAS SANDWICHED INTO A ROUND OF MEETINGS CONNECTED WITH FORMATION OF THE NEW SYRIAN CABINET (SEPTTEL). ALTHOUGH SOLEMN ON THE ISSUE OF WITHDRAWAL, ASSAD WAS RELAXED AND FRIENDLY AND REPEATEDLY WAVED HIS PROTOCOL CHIEF OUT OF THE ROOM IN ORDER TO CONTINUE THE DISCUSSION.

12. SUGGEST PASS USDEL SECRETARY, AMMAN, BEIRUT, CAIRO, JERUSALEM, JIDDA, TEL AVIV, USUN. MURPHY
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